EXERCISE IN FUTILITY

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Sweat ran in rivulets along my face and back; my breath came in short pants (and T-shirts); my heart was pounding; and pain racked every working muscle of my body.

Was I in the throes of a heart attack? Had a Charley horse jarred me awake from a nightmare? Was I in a death struggle with an armed burglar? Could I have been the drunken Alaska tourist who confused a bet by wrestling the Eskimo woman and raping the grizzly bear? Worse yet, could I have forgotten my wife's birthday?

No to all of these. I simply was involved in a three-times-a-week ritual that I inflict upon myself by choice and with relish. I am among the 50 million or so Americans who routinely exercise. And like the other 49 million, 999,999 of us, sometimes — on occasions similar to the above mentioned, when I am wondering when and if I will draw another breath — I have to ask myself why.

After all, in the 25 of my 43 years that I have not had to exercise for the rigidly defined purpose of athletic competition, I have tried almost everything — running, jogging, biking, hiking, swimming, tennis, basketball, softball, racquetball, rope jumping, aerobics, free weights and a wide variety of exercise contraptions. All I have to show for it is two crippled knees, minus the cartilage, and enough arthritis to fill a nursing home. I am no thinner than when I started; I am still closer to being a "before" than an "after"; and, Lord knows, I have gotten no taller, despite stretching exercises galore.

But am I not healthier and won't I live longer, you might ask. Isn't that the true quest of exercise? Well, those are the $64 questions and, believe it not, there are no clear answers.

It's uncertain when Americans first began strenuous exercise for no other purpose than health and fitness. But it seems to be a relatively recent phenomenon, especially when one eliminates sports and other recreational pursuits. Even physical training, save for the Greeks and Romans and Olympic athletes, perhaps, probably had its roots in this century. There's no indication, for instance, that Union or Confederate soldiers arose at dawn for "PT" before embarking on another day of fratricide. In the civilian world, meanwhile, exercise simply was a necessary evil in getting the work of life accomplished. During the Great Depression, most of the calories were burned finding enough calories for subsistence.

Like most of what historians may term illogical in looking back on today's society, the exercise craze seems to have sprung out of post-World War II America when we literally were fat, dumb, happy and, perhaps, bored. The sedentary lifestyle of most people, their imprudent diets and increasing levels of stress had made heart disease a major killer. President Kennedy, from his famous rocking chair, informed us in the early '60s that we had gotten woefully out of shape. His President's Commission on Physical Fitness got the ball joints rolling.

Then in the late '60s and '70s, Dr. Kenneth Cooper, a Dallas physician, authored a series of best-selling books promoting aerobic exercise, and Jim Fixx — capitalizing on unusual U.S. success in Olympic marathons and other distance running events — penned "The Complete Book of Running." The ensuing explosion heard 'round the world was the baby boomers donning their bloomers and igniting the exercise boom.

Today you can choose the most obscure physical torture and indulge at any time or in any clime without fear of loneliness. A recent Gallup Poll revealed that almost 50 percent of the adult population exercises daily. According to a 1979 Nielsen survey, sports activities drew about 571 million Americans. Since there were only

214 million Americans in 1979, it's obvious a lot of them were taking part in more than one sport. An estimated 30-50 million are joggers. Reports show there are some 32 million tennis players and more than 10 million racquetball players. An estimated 26 million swim at least three times a week. There are even a half-million mountain climbers.

Racing step for step with the American runner is the American entrepreneur. Exercise has become a multibillion-dollar-a-year business. The National Sporting Goods Association estimated 1982 sales to individuals of athletic equipment — including barbells, treadmills, trampolines, exercise bicycles, rowing machines and jump ropes — to be $499.4 million. A man's home not only is his castle but his gymnasium — a sort of "Home Sweat Home."

In the same year, Americans bought 42.2 million pairs of exercise shorts for $374 million. They spent $212 million on sweat shirts and $385 million on warm-up suits. Exercise clothing is high-fashion, with the coining of the phrase, "locker-room chic." Warm-up suits, running shorts, socks, shirts, hats, visors, sunglasses and headbands are acceptable apparel at the supermarket and the Super Bowl.

My personal pet peeve in exercise fashion is the athletic shoe. Gone are the days when a $20 pair of canvas Converse All-Stars would do a Man for all Seasons. Now one is required to have a specialized shoe for running, aerobics, court play and even walking — each at $60 to $80 a pair — unless, of course, he buys a $100 pair of "cross-trainers," whatever they are. The latest innovation allows the wearer to inflate his shoe via an air button on the heel. I am told, however, that it does not cure what has come to be known as "white man's disease" among slow, low-leaping basketball players.

Unfortunately, athletic shoes also have become accepted everyday apparel. The Nike Company alone sold 13 million running shoes in 1983, and sales of jogging shoes have doubled in the past five years. This is unfortunate because it has led to such fashion statements as American male teen-agers wearing unlaced, oversized, high-top basketball shoes with dress clothes. That's not to mention the cost of the environmental impact statement that was made necessary in a vain attempt to eradicate a growing air pollution menace known as "sneaker odor."

Then there's television, which has done more, perhaps, than any other segment of America to promote exercise. Americans tune in daily to exercise shows. Housewives buy home videos to look like Jane Fonda, and their husbands buy home videos to look at Jane Fonda. Yes, sex appeal plays a major role in the exercise boom. The same athletic fashion industry that spawned sneakers also has provided men with leotards and spandex exercise suits, although we don't wear them.

The home away from home for the exercise nut is the local health or fitness club, where an estimated one-tenth of all Americans pay some $8 billion a year for what easily could be described as physical torture. The facilities range from spartan converted warehouses with minimal services and equipment to fancy spalike retreats with sleek interiors and instructors poised to help at almost every exercise station. These so-called exercise stations actually are weight machines designed by the Nautilus Company and others. Not only do these machines bear a striking resemblance to contraptions utilized in dungeons during the Middle Ages to torture naughty knaves and distressed damsels, they pretty much inflict the same punishments. Except that in these modern decorated dungeons, people willingly pay for the pain — three or four times a week. If exercise is supposed to be fun, why aren't these people smiling?

What all of this says is that the American bent toward excess extends to

exercise. Health experts Joseph and Richard Wassersug, in an article on fitness fallacies, claim Americans have adopted the same attitude toward exercise as toward the use of vitamins: "If a little is good for you, then a lot is much better." There always have been a few voices of reason in the second-wind wilderness, but their numbers are growing. The "no pain, no gain" and "go for the burn" advocates seem to be a dying breed.

One reason may be that the exercise phenomenon has proved a financial bonanza for another segment of society, the medical industry. Doctors, clinics and emergency rooms handle an estimated 3 million to 5 million sports- and exercise-related injuries each year, and the number of minor aches, pains and pulled muscles that go unreported is beyond counting. As one doctor put it, orthopedic surgeons love snow skiing just as much as the participants. Even Dr. Kenneth Cooper of aerobics fame shifted gears after suffering a series of bone fractures and heel problems. "I've changed my mind," he was quoted as saying. And we all know what happened to Jim Fixx; he collapsed at age 52 with a fatal heart attack while running.

The definitive diatribe on exercise, "The Exercise Myth," was written by Dr. Henry A. Solomon, a New York City cardiologist. He and the late Dr. Peter Steincrohn, a former nationally syndicated newspaper medical columnist, both pretty well subscribe to the old theory that when one feels a desire to exercise, he should lie down until the feeling goes away. Solomon, in his book, attempts to debunk most of the pro-exercise claims, especially the widely-accepted assertion that physical fitness prolongs life.

For instance, the most widely quoted study equating exercise and life expectancy was done in the mid-1970s by Dr. Ralph S. Paffenberger Jr. of the Stanford University School of Medicine. Paffenberger analyzed 16,936 questionnaires of supposedly healthy Harvard alumni who had entered the university from 1916 to 1950. He estimated energy expenditure from the activities the respondents reported — everything from reading to squash, from doing nothing to distance running and competitive team games. The data reportedly indicated that high-level energy expenditure was protective against fatal and non-fatal coronary heart disease, but anything less than high-level energy expenditure was of little or no protective value.

Dr. Solomon claims the Harvard study was flawed. For some reason, he argues, those who answered the questionnaire were considerably healthier than the alumni who failed to respond. The fact that those who did respond weren't representative of Harvard alumni in general was easy to tell, Solomon maintains. Harvard keeps records of all alumni deaths, and as the years passed it turned out that those who had responded to the survey weren't dying off as fast as those who hadn't. The only thing the Harvard study proved, Solomon sarcastically states, is if you want to live longer, answer a Harvard alumni questionnaire. Dr. Aaron Stern, a psychiatrist, agrees, stating: "Exercise is no cure for the inevitable effects of age, no matter how much the cardiovascular system may benefit."

If exercise doesn't make us live longer, at least it makes us slimmer. Wrong, claims a study quoted in Time magazine, which noted that the average marathoner, one who runs the mythical 26 miles, 385 yards, uses 2,700 calories. That's still short of the 3,500 calories necessary to burn off one pound. Speaking of the marathon, few people seem to recall the full story for which the marathon is named. In 490 B.C. the runner Pheidippides carried news of the Greek victory over the Persians from Marathon to Athens — a distance of about 26 miles. Upon delivering his message, he dropped dead.

Solomon argues that strenuous exercise actually may mask a serious health problem. If we are sitting in an easy chair, for instance, and suddenly feel a sharp pain in our chest, we likely will become concerned immediately and rush to the hospital. If that same pain strikes while we are running, we may assume that it is a natural byproduct of exertion and ignore it.

What about the wide variety of psychological benefits people claim to receive from strenuous exercise? They range from plain old "feeling good" to euphoria that verges on the mystical. Although Dr. Solomon acknowledges that the good feeling that a little sweat produces in most of us is irrefutable, he maintains that the so-called "runner's high" is far from universal. There are many others, he points out, who abhor a drop of perspiration and don't feel the least comfort in being pushed to exercise. They get the same comfortable and pleasant feelings, Solomon submits, by reading a good book or craftily checkmating a chess opponent.

And then there is the other extreme of the "runner's high" — a growing number of exercisers who become obsessed to the point of addiction. Businesswoman Blair Sabol, writing for Mademoiselle magazine, confessed that she had to undergo medical and psychological rehabilitation after exercise produced an anorexia-like dominance over her. A devotee of the triathalon — which involves a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride and a marathon run — Ms. Sabol, for several years, followed a daily regimen that involved rising at 5 a.m. for a five-mile run and escalated to the point that exercise dominated all of her non-working hours. She said she eventually lost her sense of humor and her health. But she just couldn't stop.

Describing herself as one of the "Puppies" (Perspiring Urban Professionals), Ms. Sabol blamed her uncontrollable slavery to exercise on an explosion of endorphins — opiate-like molecules produced within the brain during physical exertion — or on an aerobic spaciness due to overoxygenation of the brain. Whatever the cause, she almost died from overexercise. Experts claim that strenuous exercise can cause special problems in women. Hormonal changes can slow or stop menstruation, for example.

Speaking of women, how about claims among men that super exercise leads to super sex? While that may be true in some cases, according to various experts, most of the time the overtaxed iron pumper is too pooped to perform. Moreover, one psychologist suggests that a misinterpretation of Darwin's "survival of the fittest" theory may have led men to equate physical fitness with sexual prowess and the subsequent ability to extend his personal seed. That's extending to the human animal the same "law of the jungle" that permits, for example, the dominate male moose who outduels a competitor to increase his access to a female at the height of her reproductive cycle. But, as the psychologist points out, only in a fairy-tale world — where kings give away daughters to knights who win athletic events against other knights — does the increased physiological fitness necessary to win the contest also mean increased Darwinian fitness for the victor.

Now that we've exploded most of the exercise myths, where do we go from here? There is the temptation to follow the credo expressed on one locker room poster, which shows a pot-bellied softball player resting comfortably on a keg of beer, hoisting a sample of the brewer's art and sarcastically proclaiming: "No Pain, No Pain."

The answer, according to most experts, is more a reasonable approach to exercise, a common sense application of moderation. After all, none of us is likely to attain Arnold Schwarzenegger's physique, outrun Frank Shorter, outlive Methuselah or seduce Jane Fonda, no matter how long and hard we push ourselves physically.

Unless we are Olympic-caliber amateur athletes or highly paid professionals, there appears to be no future in threatening the physical limits of our bodies. After all, the definition of fitness simply is the ability to perform a prescribed task or sport.

A recent report in The Journal of the American Medical Association indicated that anything beyond 30 minutes of brisk walking five times a week is, in fact, an exercise largely in lily-gilding. I have kept this a deep secret from my wife for obvious reasons, but such simple chores as leaf-raking, mowing and vacuuming, if attacked with a modicum of gusto, have been shown to have similar benefits to more strenuous exercise.

Perhaps then we should heed the advice in the hit song of the '60s and, "Walk, Don't Run." Maybe we should exercise more for fun and less for perceived fitness. We could lessen the risk of debilitating injury, perhaps, by exercising our brain instead of our brawn, by writing an Athenaeum Society paper instead of, say, playing a round of golf.

On second thought, I have this numbing pain in my right hand. ... Do you think it could be writer's cramp?